



The Koger Center, Columbia

THE CURTAIN HAS RISEN

ON PERFORMING ARTS CENTERS

By Katie McElveen

Be it the awe-inspiring resonance of a perfectly pitched aria, the flirty twang of a fiddle or a large-scale musical's joyful whirl of color and sound, there's something magical about watching a live performance of theater, dance and music. In South Carolina, dozens of playhouses, arts centers and theaters in cities both large and small make weaving a dose of culture into your vacation easy.

In Columbia, theatergoers flock to the Koger Center for the Arts (803-777-7500; www.koger.sc.edu), where near-perfect acoustics have attracted some of the world's best and most popular performers to the state, including the London Symphony, James Taylor and touring Broadway shows. It was also the site of the world premiere of "Off the Walls and Onto the Stage," a contemporary dance performance by Columbia City Ballet Executive & Artistic Director William Starrett which translates the bold works of former South Carolina artist Jonathan

Greene into movement and music. In addition to serving as home stage to the Columbia City Ballet, the Columbia Classical Ballet and the South Carolina Philharmonic, the talented performers of the University of South Carolina's School of Music also reside at the Koger.

In 1990, when the curtain rose for the first time at the Peace Center in Greenville (800-888-7768; www.peacecenter.org), the audience cheered for more than the performance. In the five years from the project's conception to its completion, it had served as a catalyst for downtown development, drawing trendy restaurants, bright boutiques and loft apartments to the area. Today, the Peace Center has become one of the top destinations in the state for entertainers such as Aretha Franklin, Bill Cosby and BB King, Broadway shows, classical performances and the unique cultural experiences from groups such as the Soweto Gospel Choir, who

used song to share their story of the joy of freedom from apartheid. With resident companies that include the South Carolina Children's Theater, the South Carolina Ballet and the Greenville Choral Society, hardly a night goes by that there isn't something going on at the Peace Center.

Aiken may be best known for horses, but the Washington Center for Performing Arts (803-648-1438; www.aikencommunityplayhouse.org) is adding to the riches of the region with top-notch local theater, song and dance reviews and international performers such as the Celtic Tenors and Quartetto Gelatto, an internationally renowned classical group that entertains through both instrumental music and operatic voice. A long theater season (it runs from September through April) means that visitors have a better-than-average chance to see a show. Creative scheduling, such as an educational program with New York's Julliard School of Music that brought jazz students to Aiken for a week of concerts and impromptu jam sessions, means that cutting-edge performances are always a possibility.

In tiny Walhalla, residents missed the joy of local theater, so they got to work and, in 2003, transformed a schoolhouse into the Walhalla Civic Auditorium (864-723-5166; www.walhallacivicauditorium.com). Although local productions dominate the schedule, word is getting out: the Glenn Miller Orchestra recently played at the center.

To ensure that beach lovers can get a dash of culture with their sun and sand, the performance season at the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina

(888-860-2787; www.artscenter-hhi.org) on Hilton Head Island runs long into the summer. Although the Arts Center has a full schedule of dramas, musicals and comedies featuring talented local performers, special events, such as summer concerts with the resident Hallelujah Singers, who present a musical history of the Gullah people, are truly one of a kind. Just a shell's throw from Folly Beach, Isle of Palms and Kiawah and Seabrook Islands, the historic Dock Street Theatre (843-577-7183; www.charlestonstage.com) brings music, dance and theater to Charleston.

Universities are often a catalyst for the growth of cultural events in smaller cities, and in South Carolina, that proves true. In Greenwood, Lander University's Cultural Center (864-388-8326; www.lander.edu) draws national and international musical, dance and theatrical performances such as the Harlem Boys Choir, the Tokyo String Quartet and Grammy Award-winning soprano Dawn Upshaw. At Clemson University, the Brooks Center for the Performing Arts (864-656-7787; www.clemson.edu/brooks) has staged more than 800 productions since it opened in 1993, including the Moscow Festival Ballet. Free student shows and recitals are regularly scheduled, as are experimental performances in the state-of-the-art black-box theater.

Whether you choose to see your favorite performer or to take a chance on someone new, one thing is certain: in South Carolina, there's no bad seat in the house.

Left to right, performances at: The Peace Center, Greenville; The Arts Center of Coastal Carolina, Hilton Head Island; The Koger Center, Columbia; The Washington Center, Aiken.



South Carolina Smiles 2007

Courtesy of The Peace Center

Photo by Rob Kaufman

Courtesy of the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina



Photo by Matthew Bassett

Courtesy of Columbia City Ballet

Courtesy of Frederick Webb